



Lenin: Co-ops work under the working class

The main item today is Lenin's "On Co-operation", a short but very rich and extraordinary document written in January 1923. Lenin suffered his third and last stroke in March of that year, from which he did not recover, dying in January, 1924. This short text is therefore among his last works.

Writing in post-revolutionary conditions, Lenin briefly acknowledges the criticism that had been heaped upon co-ops under the bourgeois dictatorship: *"There is a lot of fantasy in the dreams of the old co-operators. Often they are ridiculously fantastic,"* he says.

Following which he proceeds to place an extremely high value on co-operatives, in the new conditions, as being almost the most important component of the advance to full socialism, saying:

“since political power is in the hands of the working-class, since this political power owns all the means of production, the only task, indeed, that remains for us is to organize the population in co-operative societies.”

We can note that in this article Lenin anticipates at least one or two decades of further life of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which allowed bourgeois activity under proletarian state power.

What actually happened was that within about four years after Lenin’s death the NEP had been reversed and the policy of the Soviet Union had become one of large-scale five-year plans, only. The centralisation of the economy, started under Lenin as complementary to the NEP, had in effect become treated as an either/or mutually exclusive alternative to it.

Is this a necessary dichotomy? In South Africa, we will at some stage have to decide. So far, since the democratic breakthrough of 1994, South African governments have encouraged all kinds of employment, and small business development, including encouragement of co-operatives that has been rather nominal. In that context, note what Lenin says about the NEP: that it made the mistake of neglecting co-operatives.

This short article of Lenin’s on co-operation ranges more widely than simply on co-ops as such. Particularly interesting are the concluding paragraphs of Part 2 of the document, where Lenin refers to a “cultural revolution”.

In the penultimate paragraph of Part 1, Lenin had written:

“By ability to be a trader I mean the ability to be a cultured trader. Let those Russians, or peasants, who imagine that since they trade they are good traders, get that well into their heads. This does not follow that all. They do trade, but that is far from being cultured traders. They now trade in an Asiatic manner, but to be a good trader one must trade in the European manner. They are a whole epoch behind in that.”

The difference that Lenin refers to as between “Asiatic” and “European” trading is the difference between production for sale without having secured a market, and on the other hand, production for a known market, or for a previously-identified demand. We will pursue this question in relation to the next item, on “entrepreneurship”.

In Part 2, Lenin re-states the difference between pre- and post-revolutionary co-ops, saying:

“...we are right in regarding as entirely fantastic this ‘co-operative’ socialism, and as romantic, and even banal, the dream of transforming class enemies into class collaborators and class war into class peace (so-called class truce) by merely organizing the population in cooperative societies.

“...But see how things have changed now that the

political power is in the hands of the working-class, now that the political power of the exploiters is overthrown...”

Illustration: Selling Surplus Grain Crops at the Office of the People's Co-operative, Wang Qi, People's Republic of China, 1953

- The above is to introduce the original reading-texts: [On Co-operation, Lenin](#).
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